

Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou and EU Commissioner Chris Patten, please astonish us. It is time to talk straight. Too many people have died unnecessarily from the divergence between grand speaking and the harsh reality, it is high time for robust discussion to replace wishy-washy dialogue. Ever since the 19th century, from dragomans to seekers of political support to visa applicants, you have been accustomed to sweet talk and polite entreaties from Middle Easterners. You mistook the forest for the trees, only to find that all the courtesans around you cannot prevent West-haters from assassinating your citizens abroad and planting bombs in your cities. And as we hope to astonish you with some straight talk, we also wish you to open a debate with like-minded, Western-educated, democratic friends on this less fortunate side of the Mediterranean.

You suggest in your open letter that EU policy seeks to develop a transition to democracy and respect of human rights. We have been hearing that rhetorical line at least since the Barcelona Declaration in 1995. The results are plain: Not a single country on this side of the Mediterranean can pretend that it is in a serious process of transition to democracy, and G-8 and other summit meetings continue to accommodate all our presidents and kings-for-life next to your leaders. If there was any pressure on any government to start a transition to democracy, we have not seen it except for the controversial case of Iraq, which split the European Union.

Things have actually got worse in the past two years in most Mediterranean countries on our side of the divide. Because of the ill-conceived "war against terror," which is a major plank of your policy and that of the US government, our ministers of interior have now an even easier task to coordinate among themselves and with your security officers trampling upon our basic rights. As documented by Amnesty International's annual report published last week, Arab and Israeli leaders revel in the use of their alleged fight against terrorism. You pretend you fight for democracy, yet France and Germany have sided with Saddam Hussein before the war, while England and Spain were pursuing the empty argument of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). And if continental EU countries have all kept remarkably silence on Iraqi governmental policy to protect oil contracts with European companies in the name of WMDs, we should equally ask the whole EU about the deafening silence over 200 nuclear weapons Israel has developed over the past four decades with the active help of European engineers, and Israel's capacity to hit any Middle East country, not to mention most if not all of the EU member states?

If Iraq is in the past (we know it isn't), how high is your voice on prisoners of opinion from Mauritania to Saudi Arabia, and when will you embrace their fighters for freedom as you did with Andrei Sakharov and Aung Sun Chee, and offer them red-carpet treatment as you so willingly do with every single Middle Eastern dictator at least once a week? Occasional demarches are engaged by some of your better ambassadors, but is that a serious policy considering the stakes? One would like to acknowledge a single instance of a decisive engagement in any one Arab country against the local dictator, be he king, army officer, or son thereof. As for Israeli massive violations of Palestinian human rights, it is true that the EU has a less deferential position than that which prevails in Washington, but you keep advocating a "dialogue" with Ariel Sharon, who has a unique record of criminality in the world, as underlined in Belgian courts. For a European Union that prides itself on ending impunity through a campaign in favor of the International Criminal Court, we expect an open statement on the need to bring to account the hero of Sabra and Shatila and the brutal reoccupation of the West Bank: How are Haidar, Milosevic, or Pinochet in any way better than Sharon?

It has now been twenty years since the Venice Declaration, a good move then. But Europe has not been able to move forward in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and you would be wrong to think that the fault is mainly that of blind US support to Tel Aviv. You are unable to move forward because you do not deal with the Arab-Israeli problem as an issue of democracy and human rights, equally problematic for the Arab states and Israel. Who can disagree with the fact that, with the possible fragile exception of Morocco, the Arab states are not democratic? Neither is Israel.

We need to engage you on the fact that Israel is not a democratic state. It never was, because Israeli rule over Palestinians has been brutal and absolute ever since its inception. Look at the situation in perspective: among the 8 million Palestinians, 4 million among those prevented since 1948 from going back to their homes "do not exist." Three to 4 million have been subjected to the most brutal policy since 1967, and over 1 million Arab-Israelis have a constitutionally inferior status within 1948 Palestine; they are harassed and discriminated against daily, without ever holding a single ministerial position despite the fact that they represent on paper some 20 percent of the "Israeli" population.

So it is time to move on from Venice, be true to Barcelona promises on democracy, and astonish us. Here are three easy suggestions if you really wish to support us democrats in the region: Ask for a change of leaders in every single Arab country; behave with Sharon like you behaved with Milosevic; and request and ensure that all Palestinians and Israelis be treated equally in the historic land of Palestine.

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